

CHALLENGES OF INNOVATIVE ASSESSMENT IN MAINSTREAM SCHOOLING SYSTEMS

Uma Harikumar



“Here’s to the crazy ones. The misfits, The rebels, The trouble makers. The round pegs in the square holes-The ones who see things differently. They’re not fond of rules. And they have no respect for the status quo. You can quote them, disagree with them, glorify or vilify them. About, the only thing you can’t do is ignore them, because they change things. They push the human race forward. And while some may see them as the crazy ones, we see genius. Because the people, who are crazy enough to think they can change the world, are the ones who do.”

— Apple Inc.

Mainstream schooling systems, or state education as it can also be referred to, work on the basis of education of a community of children. The public nature of this system, means that children of different backgrounds, religions and classes mingle and mix naturally, learning to work and learn together in an environment that will prove stable for future years, through employment and life in general.

If defined literally, innovative assessment could be any form of assessment which involves the application of a new technique or method. However, innovative assessment has come to mean more than that. It is a term which encompasses a whole range of different techniques and methods, not all of which are new inventions. What unites them is a common goal: to improve the quality of student learning. Innovative assessment is also about what Heron (1981) called ‘the redistribution of educational power’ when assessment becomes not just something which is ‘done to’ learners but also

‘done with’ and ‘done by’ learners [Harris and Bell, 1990]. As defined by Rowntree (1977), it is about getting to know students and the quality of their learning.

Any initiative undertaken to improve assessment practice must take account of the formal assessments that are currently in use. In general, any changes in an assessment system must take into account the broader education transformation agenda of the system and have the support of key constituencies, especially education department officials and teachers.

The effective functioning of this innovation is determined not only by how this articulates with other facets of education, such as curriculum and instruction, but also by how well the various sectors(primary,secondary,higher)andstructures within the education system articulate with one another. In an ideal context, all components of an assessment system would articulate perfectly and function effectively to produce the desired outcomes. However, this is difficult to attain in practice.

In principle, the innovative assessments may aim at a “level playing field” for all candidates. In reality, however, differences in “opportunity to learn” mean that not all learners are equally prepared, and this inequality is usually reflected in the outcomes. “The no pass or no fail principle throws up children with various capabilities into the Upper primary section of schooling. Trying innovative assessments with these groups is a huge challenge since you have no idea about where they are when they come.” says Mrs Sraboni Mukhopadhyay a secondary school teacher.

Our country, comprising multiple language communities, requires greater resources to adequately address the needs of all learners. All instruments need to be translated into one or more languages without undue bias against any group, additional analyses are required, and reports must be published in multiple languages. In practice, there may be no alternative to the use of a single language but there are ways to mitigate some of the difficulties associated with testing (see Heyneman and Ransom, 1990).

Most new innovations experience an “implementation dip” – that is, student performance gets worse before improving. Improvements in student achievement may take as long as five years in primary schools, and longer in secondary schools (Fullan, 2001). Teachers working in innovative assessments will need extra support to understand where they may need to adjust practices.

If the design of the assessment in the school was based on class levels; then each class level would have different modes in their assessments. Subject teachers who used to teach the Primary 4 class would not know what was happening at the Primary 2 level. Thus coordination between class levels appears to be important and necessary. Mrs. Aloka Mathur, a teacher, feels that “Innovative assessments are welcome but how do we cope with the numbers in the class? The teacher pupil ratio prevailing in the mainstream schools is a huge handicap for effective implementation. Teachers have to prepare themselves for heavy workload and maintenance of data in various forms.

Innovative standardized tests may not reflect the correct feedback since the content to be taught is left open to the teacher at the Primary levels. There is a wide difference even among the sections of the same class, hence a standardized test would not reflect the correct picture.” Each teacher may grade or mark a pupil according to

their own prejudices. So the teachers needed to have consensus in assessing pupils by sitting together to discuss about the marking criteria they needed.

The shortage of qualified and experienced teachers, as well as the low morale and motivation of the teaching force, can also be cited as one of the key factors innovative systems face as roadblocks. “The implementation of effective teacher development programs is vital for innovations to be successful” says Mrs Sraboni Mukhopadhyay – a practising teacher. “Innovation is difficult in an inclusive schooling system where the pace of learning as well the heterogeneous background of students can be a huge challenge for teachers in implementing innovations effectively.” A key focus of these training programs should be the use of appropriate assessment practices in the classroom and for examination purposes. Very often, there were new teachers joining the school in new academic years, some of them might not have the professional knowledge and skills in the new techniques of assessment. The school had to allow adequate time for these new teachers to establish their relevant concept and practice.

There is general agreement that the convergence of computers, multimedia,

and broadband communication networks will have a substantial impact on

assessment. The prospect of technology-based testing itself still seems rather remote, given the infrastructure requirements. Technology requirements can be a constraint, especially for those places that have little or no access to the required expertise. In addition, assessment tools and information must be made available to teachers in order to ensure maximum benefit to learners. The critical issue is striking a balance between the use of sophisticated hard and soft assessment related technologies and the successful transformation of the system. The

reasons include the pace at which technology has been introduced into schools, the organization of technology resources (e.g., computer labs), poor technical support and lack of appropriate professional development for teachers.

High stakes tests can lead to unwanted consequences such as a narrowing of the curriculum and an undue emphasis on test preparation. This is particularly harmful when the learner cohort is heterogeneous with respect to goals. Even if both the innovative assessment and education systems function effectively, they can still result in unintended and educationally sub-optimal consequences. For example, an effort to implement minimum levels of learning was appropriately accompanied by large-scale teacher training programs. However, within a few years, researchers found that teachers were teaching to the test (Govinda, 1998). Govinda (1998) notes that there were additional negative consequences since the net effect of the program reinforced rote learning and “transmissionist” teaching methods, and it helped generate a major after-school test preparation industry that served to increase the bias against learners from poorer backgrounds.

“Innovation— any new idea—by definition will not be accepted at first. It takes repeated attempts, endless demonstrations, and monotonous rehearsals before innovation can be accepted and internalized by an organization. This requires courageous patience.”— Warren Bennis

As noted by Noah and Eckstein (1992a), changes in examinations have been used as levers to promote change in education and society, to reform the curriculum, to shift effective control of the system away from—or toward—the center, and to achieve specific political goals.

Innovative assessment is designed to develop critical thinking including the ability to be self-critical. Innovative assessment techniques are not without their problems and certainly require careful implementation if they are to avoid the ‘famous failure’ label, however the arguments in favor of changing the way we assess more than outweigh the potential problems. Innovative approach to assessment has been primarily made on the grounds of improving the quality of student learning, and our challenge lies in viewing it as an integral part of the teaching and learning process and not as assessment.

Uma is currently working as an external consultant at Azim Premji Foundation, Bangalore. She joined the Foundation in 2003 and brought with her 25 years of teaching experience. Prior to joining the Foundation, she worked as a teacher at Sophia High School and Kendriya Vidyalaya Sanghathan. She can be contacted at uma.harikumar@azimpremjifoundation.org